SOC.4.01.2 To Move a Nation

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Policy Politics

TO MOVE A NATION. The Politics of Foreign Policy in the Administration of John F. Kennedy. By Roger Hilsman. 602 pp. New York: Doubleday & Co. $6.95.

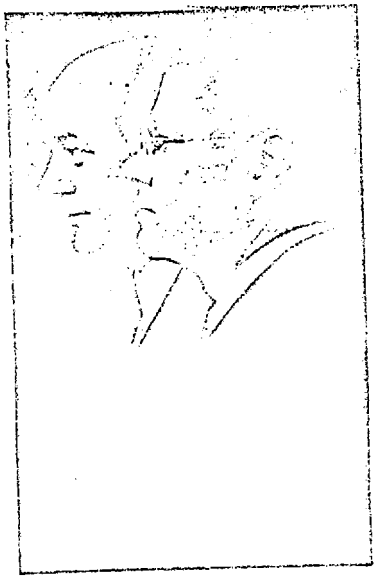
By WALTER JOHNSON

THIS book by Roger Hilsman, director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research in the Department of State, then Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs during the Kennedy Administration, is a highly informative study of the internal and external forces that shaped much of American foreign policy during the thousand days.

Before joining the Kennedy Administration, Hilsman, who had already written "Strategic Intelligence and National Decisions" (1956), was working on a theoretical book concerning the politics of policy-making in the Truman and Eisenhower Administrations. As a result of becoming a participant in policy-making, he has instead concentrated on the Kennedy Administration. Hilsman points out that the book, in part, "is a theoretical study in political science; in part, it is history, and in part, it is a memoir."

In order that the book have authority and depth on the process of policymaking, he wisely wrote on those subjects of which he had substantial personal knowledge. He discusses the roles of the State Department, the Pentagon, the C.I.A. and the influence of the men heading each of them; the Bay of Pigs and the Cuban missile crisis; Laos; the Congo crisis; the United States and Communist China, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam.

At President Kennedy's instigation, Secretary of State Dean Rusk told the policy-making officers of the State Department in February, 1961, that the President expected that the Department would take charge of foreign policy.



Secretary of State Rusk and Secretary of Defense McNamara, 1963.

But as this book demonstrates in ample detail, Rusk "seemed to feel that it was inappropriate for the Secretary of State to do battle in the name of the Department, even for the important cause of maintaining the pre-eminence of political considerations." According to Hilsman, Rusk seemed to see himself "not as the maker and advocate of policy, but, at the President's side, as a judge."

As a result, it was the President himself who had to originate and stimulate new ideas and programs.

Hilsman describes Secretary of Defense McNamara as "an extraordinarily able man, a brilliantly efficient man. But he was not a wise man." Hilsman praises McNamara's "creative leadership" of the Defense Department and adds: "Where Rusk was hesitant and tentative, McNamara was crisp, decisive, and almost totally lacking in self-doubt. In his field, he was superb; the risk was when he roamed beyond his field, and the concern of a President was to exercise care that his neighbor's fields did not develop vacuums into which McNamara's energy and self-confidence would thrust."

The struggle among Americans in Washington and Saigon over what American policy should be toward Vietnam, as described by Hilsman, is one of the most challenging and informative sections of "To Move a Nation." The critical difference between the advocates of unconventional warfare and the advocates of conventional warfare emerges in stark detail. During the Kennedy Administration, the rank and file of the Vietcong were being recruited *inside* South Vietnam. Food and weapons, too, came largely from within South Vietnam. And the cadres being sent over the infiltration routes were South Vietnamese who had gone north after the Geneva accords of 1954.

Hilsman and others argued that the "internal" war required the separation of the Vietcong from the peasants. Military and police measures were necessary to provide physical security for the villagers; then, a political and social program of reform had to be instituted. But there were high military spokesmen at the Pentagon and in Saigon who insisted that the essence of the problem was military and, therefore, could be solved with traditional warfare.

Hilsman asserts that if Vietnam represents a failure in the Kennedy Administration, "it was a failure in implementation." Kennedy did not want to turn the conflict into an American war. "In the final analysis," Kennedy said on Sept. 2, 1963, "it is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it." While the U.S. could help with advisors and equipment, the Government of South Vietnam had to win the support of the people. "What President Kennedy wanted to do," Hilsman writes, "was to use American power to give the South Vietnamese the chance to win the allegiance of the people, to use American power to deter the Communist North from doing any more than infiltrating a few thousand ex-southerners, to deter them from escalating the struggle into a larger war."

HILSMAN writes that McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and Gen. Paul D. Harkins, then Commander in Chief of the Army's forces in the Pacific, were never more than lukewarm to this strategic concept. As a result, "military factors were emphasized over political." In the struggle to dominate policy, Hilsman charges,

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Dean Rusk and the Department of State "failed to stand up and make the case for the political side of the equation with the strength, vigor, and determination with which Secretary McNamara and the military chiefs made the case for the military side." Although McNamara opposed the extreme proposals to escalate the war, "he was basically sympathetic to the general strategy of escalation. So was Secretary Rusk."

In January, 1964, Hilsman decided to resign as Assistant Secretary of State. In view of the people to whom President Johnson turned for advice on Vietnam and the President's own approach to the problem, Hilsman writes: "It seemed clear that his natural instinct was toward attempting a military solution to the question of Vietnam, although hedging it with political qualifications."

In his concluding chapters, Hilsman makes many wise and perceptive comments on the politics of policy-making. Among other things, he concludes: "The relative power of the different groups of people involved is as relevant to the final decision as the appeal of the goals they seek or the cogency and wisdom of their arguments. . . . Who advocates a particular policy is as important as what he advocates."